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SUBJECT: ARMENIA'S HEAD IN THE SAND ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

This cable is sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) During a two-day conference on domestic violence in Yerevan, representatives of the police and the Prosecutor General's (PG) office variously denied the existence of the problem in Armenia, used flowery language to expound upon the strength of the Armenian family and vigorously opposed local activists' plans to draft domestic violence legislation. Accurate statistics on domestic violence are unavailable in Armenia, and work is needed to determine the extent of the problem. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Accurate statistics on domestic violence are impossible to come by in Armenia, due mostly to societal stigmas that discourage women from coming forward and prompt law enforcement occasionally to adopt a "she was asking for it" attitude toward those who do ask for help. Armine Tanashyan of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs' Women's Issues Unit told conference participants that, without accurate statistics, it would be difficult to convince the government that domestic violence is a problem. (NOTE: The GOAM's second National Action Plan (NAP) on domestic violence was adopted in 2004; however, it relies solely on international assistance, as the government has not allocated funds for its implementation. END NOTE.) Tanashyan told conference participants that the ministry was considering opening shelters in 2007 with state funding, but noted the shelters could be created and run by NGOs. (NOTE: The Women's Rights Center NGO, which sponsored the conference, runs a domestic violence shelter now. UMCOR and the Hope and Help NGO currently run two separate shelters used mostly by trafficking victims. END NOTE.) Demonstrating the level of government impotence on the subject, Tanashyan urged NGOs to develop awareness and legal initiatives in 2007, so that the GOAM could report them to the Council of Europe as proof of its work against domestic violence.

WE DON'T NEED NO STINKIN' LAW

¶3. (SBU) Police representative Karen Mehrabyan said he opposed the efforts of the Women's Rights Center to draft legislation explicitly prohibiting domestic violence, noting that the Criminal Code already criminalizes violence. Mehrabyan said that, because domestic violence crimes constituted a very small percentage of infractions, it was clear that insufficient public demand existed for a domestic violence law. Mehrabyan said Armenian law enforcement should

focus on domestic violence prevention. Drawing groans from the crowd, the Police representative said victims often are to blame as they provoke attacks through their appearance or behavior.

14. (SBU) PG office representative Harutyun Sargsian then lectured the gathering at length on the origins of Armenian law, Armenia's Christian heritage and its innate respect for women (based on reverence for the Virgin Mary) and the strength of the Armenian family. "You pretend to want to protect women's rights," Sargsian told conference participants, "but in the end you will destroy families by convicting the groom."

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

15. (SBU) Capping the conference, Women's Rights Center director Susanna Vardanyan said the women's rights community's primary goal should be to make the GOAM aware of the domestic violence problem in the country. Vardanyan went on to say that, in the two years since her center has run a shelter, it has been a haven for 44 women and 58 children. Nearly half of those, she noted, had come to the shelter in the last seven months.

16. (SBU) Vardanyan also said the government must assist domestic abuse victims with their post-shelter rehabilitation. Too often, she said, shelter residents end up returning to their abusers because they have no other support network and cannot find jobs.

THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM: UNKNOWN

YEREVAN 00001704 002 OF 002

17. (SBU) COMMENT: Between the legacy of Soviet indifference toward domestic violence and the Caucasus cultural attitude toward women, we were not surprised to find such reluctance to move forward. Anecdotal evidence suggests that domestic abuse is a real problem in Armenia, but no one can with any authority comment on the real extent of it. Despite the citing of two studies at the conference -- one published on ArmeniaNow.com claiming that 46 percent of women were victims of domestic abuse and another from 2000 that purported that nearly three-quarters of Armenian women had been victims -- we cannot vouch for the methodology of either of these studies. Judging from the high percentage of self-assessed victims in the results, we suspect that they are faulty. Even the most scientific survey would run across the problem of abused respondents who simply refused to tell the truth. Vardanyan was correct in her assessment that the women's rights community must focus on proving the extent of the domestic violence problem; the immediate concern should be to compile accurate data.
GODFREY